

Chapter 17: Sustainability Transitions Across the Agri-Food Landscape in Canada

Key Messages

Perspectives

- There are three core perspectives on agrifood sustainability, each of which emphasizes different dimensions of agri-food (un)sustainability and locates “the problem” and “the solution” very differently as well:
 - Eco-productivist agriculture is “reformist” in orientation, highlighting the role of new technologies and large-scale operations in making agriculture more efficient, both environmentally and economically (producing *more* food with *less* inputs and thus *less* negative impacts)
 - Agroecology advocates for a paradigm shift, aiming to produce food without ecologically harmful inputs and practices, and focusing on the broader social and political economic relations tied in with food production and consumption. With their emphasis on place-based food systems, agroecological visions also value non-agricultural food systems (hunting, gathering, gleaning) and the importance of maintaining or revitalizing Indigenous food systems
 - Greening Consumption focuses on changing consumer behaviour to yield environmental benefits, by putting less sustainable business models out of practice (e.g., ending animal agriculture), supporting the advance of new food commodities (i.e. novel proteins) or using consumer power to encourage changes towards greener production practices

Processes

- There is a political component to the lack of transformational action in agriculture – political parties trying to appease farmers (and corporate food producers) who increasingly feel squeezed by the economics of farming, and now by climate policy
- Neoliberalization of agriculture in Canada has resulted in various sets of winners and losers, with the general trend being a political economic environment that makes it more difficult for smaller players to compete with bigger, corporate agglomerations

Policies

- Government policies have relied mainly on eco-productivism approaches such as reduced tillage to reduce soil erosion and Integrated Pest Management (IPM)
- Agroecology tools include organic, 'biodynamic', 'permacultural' and 'regenerative organic' farming, all of which share some core framings of the need for food to be produced in ways which are, first and foremost, ecologically sustainable. 'Land Back' initiatives are also emphasized as a way of 'decolonizing' agriculture
- The Government of Canada's 2019 Food Policy for Canada is one (rare) instance of agroecological visions having a policy impact
- Green consumerism is aligned with the 2019 Canada Food Guide (which decenters animal protein) and the 2019 EAT-Lancet Commission's "Planetary Health Diet"

Recommendations

- We see significant potential for what we would call agri-food pluralism – namely, being open to the benefits of pursuing multiple perspectives to sustainability even if they don't always align with each other
- We also see value in cross-fertilization. E.g. The push for more "regenerative" agriculture (RA) in Canada, so long as we are cautious about greenwashing. RA restores degraded soils by bringing practices from agroecology into large scale (eco-productivist) agriculture. In some cases, RA is encouraged through (neoliberal) third party certification schemes that depend on the growing influence of green consumption.